MONROE COUNTY

NEWS RELEASE

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DONIGER & ALLKOFER ASK ARMY CORPS TO CONSIDER OTHER OPTIONS FOR ONTARIO BEACH

Monroe County's Health Director, Dr. Andrew Doniger, and Parks Director, Frank Allkofer, said today that an initial Army Corps of Engineers study on ways to improve water quality at Ontario Beach had yielded no practical solutions.

"Monroe County has worked collaboratively with the Corps and its consultants to find new and innovative approaches to solving the water quality problems at the beach," Doniger said. "We appreciate the effort that the Army Corps has put into this work and we look forward to ultimately finding a workable solution."

The county is working with the Corps to consider additional alternatives in their study to improve water quality for swimming at Ontario Beach Park. The Army Corps of Engineers shared a draft report in March on this issue and has been working with county officials to find a workable strategy from the list of options outlined in that report.

Currently, algae and other organic material collects and decomposes along the shoreline at Ontario Beach Park. This situation results in frequent beach closures because of high bacteria levels in the water. The organic material is trapped in the swimming beach area by the pier at the eastern end of the park extending into the lake, at the mouth of the Genesee River.

In that report, a consultant engaged by the Army Corps, evaluated a number of options to improve water quality. The options ranged from the installation of large pumps to move the water and decomposing organic material away from the beach area to reconfiguring the beach itself into a crescent shape. Because there are no existing models in the United States where any of the proposed solutions have been undertaken, the consultant was unable to predict with any certainty if any of the options would produce improved water quality.

The most expensive option evaluated in the report, a series of large pumps, would cost an approximate $17 million with no guarantee of its effectiveness.

Under that scenario, Monroe County would be responsible for a 25% share of the initial construction and installation expense and after that the annual operating costs and maintenance of the pumps.

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Under current estimates, the annual operating costs of the pumps would total $200,000 per year and does not take into account future increases in the cost of energy. Since the operation of large water pumps is energy intensive, this factor is particularly significant – especially with currently forecasted large energy price increases.

Another area of concern for the county and Army Corps centers on the cost/benefit ratio of the options presented. If the $17 million pump project were undertaken, it might only result in an additional 10-12 days of swimming at the beach. This scenario would be difficult to justify given the expense and the reality that the solution is untried and might not ultimately work as desired. Additionally, because of the size of the pumps and the resulting water velocity from their discharge, swimmer safety issues would need to be thoroughly evaluated.

Other options, which would pump decaying organic material from the lake to the river, raise environmental issues and concerns.

"Any solution at Ontario Beach Park must achieve a balance between the needs of swimmers and the environment," said Allkofer. "The beach area is an irreplaceable resource from both a recreation and environmental standpoint. Any solution to improve water quality for swimming in this area must balance these two important needs without jeopardizing one for the other."

Earlier this month, in response to the Army Corps of Engineers report and extensive meetings held on this topic, Monroe County asked the Army Corps to look at additional factors and alternatives to the options already presented.

In that May 1, 2001 correspondence the county asked the corps to look at the feasibility of constructing a large public swimming pool complex at Ontario Beach Park. The pool complex would give bathers an alternative on days when Lake Ontario was not deemed suitable for swimming. This plan would also include a habitat restoration component, which would be environmentally friendly and allow the project to still qualify for federal aid.

The county has identified this project to cost approximately $2 million to $4 million. The operating costs for the swimming complex would be minimal in that the county could use current lifeguard resources to oversee swimmers in this area.

"Clearly the alternatives as they are currently outlined are not workable from the county's perspective," said Doniger. "None of us are comfortable that we have arrived at the optimum solution for the Ontario beach environment or its swimmers."

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